COUNTING LOVE'S TOLL

By FRANCES A. HARMER

AS the sun sloped to the west its hot rays lost a little of their fierceness. Mrs. Moriarty, ironing by the open window of the tenement flat, wiped a damp brow and sighed with evident relief.

She laid the underclothes and gingham frocks of her five smaller children, and the shirt-waists of her grown daughter, into separate heaps before turning to sheets, pillow-cases and towels. She had just tested the heat of the iron by the application of a cautious forefinger, previously moistened at the tip of her tongue, when the wearer of the shirt-waists came into the furnace-like room.

"It's late ye are, Sheilah," said her mother, sprinkling anew a sheet. "Turned of seven."

Sheilah Moriarty dropped into the chair nearest the window and leaned her elbows on the table.

"They were changing the notions around, and we had to stay." She looked wistfully about her. "My! but I'm starvin' for a cup of tea."

Her mother put a cup and saucer from the shelf behind her on the table; and Sheilah, rising, took the teapot from the stove.

"Law, mother! why d'ye work so? I'd let them wear—black. What's the use?"

She leaned out of the window, to reach the butter from the wooden box which served for a refrigerator. Mrs. Moriarty had put two rolls beside her cup, and Sheilah began to cut and butter them.

Her two hands encircled her cup, as, her elbows again on the deal table, she relapsed into complete enjoyment of the creature comforts of rest and food. Her pompadoured hair was damply trailing from its proper elevation over brow and temples. Her small oval face, with its egg-like line of chin, its straight, short nose, its black, luminous eyes shaded by thickly growing lashes, began to lose the whiteness born of heat and fatigue, and to flush into the shell pink and vivacity natural to her.

Mrs. Moriarty drew a chair from behind her and sat down.

"Pour me a sup o' tay into yer saucer," she said, her speech suffering relapse into its earlier phrasing. "Ah!" She drank deeply. "That's what I used to say, Sheilah, aroon—What's the use? But my poor mother was English, and I mind me how she struggled to keep up with the tubbing of the children o' Saturday nights, and the clean clothes to put on iv'ry Sunday morning. 'If I let that go,' she'd be saying, 'seems like I'd let everything go.' And now, since himself wint home, and I've had the care of ye all, I find meself a-sayin', 'What's the use?' and me other self a-sayin', as my poor mother said, 'If ye let that go, ye'll let ev'rything go.'"

She stopped, for Sheilah had ceased to listen. Putting the saucer down, she rose and resumed the ironing. But she glanced, from time to time, at the girl's dreaming eyes, following the sharpening outline of roofs against the sky.

"Sheilah," she whispered tensely, "is Patrick O'Meara coming for ye the night?"

The delicate flush on Sheilah's cheeks burned to crimson.

"He'll come," the girl said hesitatingly, "but—maybe it's for the last time."

Mrs. Moriarty studied her anxiously. "He's a good man, Sheilah," she urged. "A Cath'lic, and steady, and—ye wouldn't have to wor-rk yer fingers to the bone. And ye're not strong."

Sheilah's eyes sought the skyline again.

"I just think of it all day," she said simply. "Last week I'd made up me mind to say yes, and I'd begun to think of me clothes. But——"

"I was scared of ye goin' to that big store," sighed her mother. "The clerks there dress like dudes—and they're more to a girl's fancy than a plain man like Patrick, who works on the roads. But it's on their own backs the money goes, Sheilah. Ye'll have Pat's for yer housekeepin'."

"It's not the clerks, mother." Sheilah rose and put away her cup and saucer. "I've thought of taking to service."

Her mother started. "To service?"

Sheilah nodded. "Milly Stearn has an aunt in Mrs. Van Tessel's service. She's got Milly in. She lives just like a lady, mother. There are seven upper maids, and each one has a tiny room, all new and clean, and they take a bath every day—not just Sat'dy nights—and they wear clean clothes, pink and blue chambrays, and caps and aprons like the ones you see on the stage. The work's easy, Milly's aunt says—and five a week, while I get three-fifty now. Five, and me keep. I'd send you home three and get meself a trousseau with the rest. As for marryin'—that'd come later."

"My mother was in service in the ould country," said Mrs. Moriarty, putting the irons on the stove and folding the ironing-blanket. "All the same, Sheilah, what about Pat? Won't ye be flingin' away a good chanst?"

Sheilah shook her head. "I guess there'd be others. But Pat—well, I guess he'd wait. Mother," a sudden passing crept into her voice, "I like him well enough—as much as I ever expect I'll care for any one. But the truth is," she faced her mother defiantly, "I want an easier life than you've had. Here you are, nigh fifty, and working hard! I get all played out at the store, but that's easy to what you do. You're on your feet all day! Three meals, and the dishes, and the washing and the ironing, and the making and the mending. When one thing's done, ye rest yourself by taking up another! I hate to see you live so, and I won't live so myself. No, I like Pat! But I don't like him well enough to slave for him and his children as you slaved for poppa and us."

"You'd not slave, Sheilah."

The words came from the open door, and both women turned in some dismay. Patrick O'Meara, in his Sunday suit of pepper and salt, a bright blue tie matching his honest eyes and contrasting pleasingly with his red hair, stood in the doorway, flushed and evidently perturbed.

"Why, good-evening to you, Patrick," said Mrs. Moriarty pleasantly. "My! but it's been warm the day! Sit down, Sheilah, a seat."

Patrick nodded to Mrs. Moriarty, but his blue eyes rested hungrily upon Sheilah's dainty smallness and slimness, as she stood before him, her dark head bent.

"I came to see if ye'd go to the roof garden with me, Sheilah," went on Patrick, laying some roses on the table. He looked wistfully from them to her. If only he could get her away, into the environment of the roof garden, which he vaguely felt to be more propitious, more appropriate, he might yet say all he had meant to say, hear what he had hoped to hear. His Celtic nature revolted against the prose of the present situation.

BOTH WOMEN TURNED IN DISMAY

Sheilah turned away, her embarrassment masking itself as sullenness.

"Thank ye, Pat. I guess I won't go out to-night."

"Sheilah! Ye're turned against me?" he cried.

"Never think that, Pat," interposed Mrs. Moriarty, with a troubled glance from him to her daughter. "Sure, the child's not feeling good over ye hearin' what she said. And she was but havin' her joke, as girls will. Sheilah, get your hat, won't ye? Sure, a breath of air'll do ye good."

Sheilah turned passionately to her mother. "And you stay stewing here, all the same! Come, too, mother, and I'll go."

Mrs. Moriarty smiled.

"I go, alanna, and leave Moira and Mike to come to grief on the sidewalk? No, I can't go."

Sheilah hesitated.

"Come, Sheilah," pleaded Pat. "If ye knew how I've been counting the hours till this one should come round! And ye promised."

The girl shook her head.

"I guess I won't, Patrick. I'm sorry ye heard me as ye came up. But mother's wrong. I wasn't joking. What I said I mean. So it wouldn't hardly be fair, would it, to let ye spend your money on taking me to roof gardens, while I was meaning——"

Again Mrs. Moriarty came to the rescue.

"Mercy on us, Sheilah! that's not the way a young man looks on his money. Sure, he's glad to go to the roof garden, and it's mighty dull without a girl!"

Patrick glanced at her gratefully. He appreciated her efforts to restore lightness to the unexpected gloom of the situation.

"That's the size of it, Sheilah," he said anxiously. "My evenin's spoilt if ye don't come."

Mrs. Moriarty brought the black hat the girl had thrown aside upon her entry, and Sheilah slowly put it on, adjusting her hair by the aid of her side-comb. Without another word she let Patrick take her down the stairs, passing by Moira and Mike without looking at them. Silently they boarded a car, and as silently rode up-town and were presently seated side by side in the open-air theatre with the gay stage in front, pleasure-seekers to right and left, and the vast panorama of New York behind them.

They gave but a perfunctory attention to the performance upon the stage, and Pat took her to the roof garden's edge and began to plead.

Sheilah leaned against the parapet, the salt sting of the air cooling and freshening her fevered cheeks. Roof beyond roof stretched before her, sharply accented in the clear air, now lighted both by the rising moon and the sun's after-glow. Far beyond wound the Hudson, black under the darkening sky, and faint lights twinkled from the distant Palisades.

She listened to his words, rough with the fervor of his love, and drew a long sigh.

"Pat," she said at length, "I don't think I ever did as much thinking as I did before we came up here to-night. I've thought it all out, and I've settled that it wouldn't do—it wouldn't do at all. I'd not make you happy after the first, and you'd not make me happy at all, at all. It might be very well, with the rooms you speak of, and the furnishing, and the new clothes, for a while. But a poor man's wife has a hard time—a hard time. Then there's the drag of the children—look at mother!—and there'd be work, work, work. Maybe I'm lazy, Pat. I don't know. Mother says I'm not strong. But I'd just hate the getting up early, to see to your breakfast."

"You never should, Sheilah," urge Pat, with desperate earnestness. "I'd get me own. You c'd lie till nine o'clock if ye wanted to."

But still she shook the little head he wanted to draw upon his shoulder.

"No, Pat, no. My mind's made up. I'm going to leave the store. I can't stand the long hours, and the being always on my feet, and the lifting down, and the putting back. I'm going to take a real easy place in Mrs. Van Tessel's house. I'll get more money than I do now, and do more for mother. But it's no, and no, and no, to you, Pat, for I couldn't stand it."

The orchestra was playing a popular waltz just then. They stood, enveloped in melody, possessed by sound. It was so loud, so gay, so dominating, that it held them, almost as a thing corporeal might have done. To the end of his life Patrick O'Meara never heard that air without a memory of the sick despair that blotted out the stars from the sky—never heard it without recalling the misery of his conviction that Sheilah truly meant just what she had said.

"I'll not come in, Sheilah," he said, when they stood on the steps of her home. "And I'll come no more at all, unless it may be that ye send for me. Good-night."

Sheilah stood on the steps, watching his burly figure as it strode to the corner, halted and disappeared. Then, with lagging steps, she mounted the stairs and passed into the room where her mother sat and sewed at a pink muslin frock for Moira to wear on Sunday.

As the girl met her mother's inquiring eyes, she said:

"He's gone, mother. I don't rightly know if he's mad with me or not. But I'm going to quit my job Sat'dy, and go to Milly's aunt Monday. It's all fixed about me going. I c'n get ready Sunday."

"I on'y hope ye haven't lost the best chanst of a husband ye'll ever get," replied her mother anxiously. "Ye'll say there's chances where yer goin'. Maybe. Meself, I don't take more stock in flunkies than I do in store clerks. Pat's a good man."

All the long night, as she lay panting and sleepless by her mother's side, with Moira wriggling uneasily across the foot of the bed, Sheilah seemed to hear these words. They set themselves to her mother's deep breathing, they sang themselves to the gay melody which was the last she had heard at the roof garden: "Pat's a good man."

And "Pat's a good man," she echoed; but added: "But he'd want three meals a day."

The change from her mother's two rooms and the dingy, tawdry splendors of bargain counters, to the magnificence of Mrs. Van Tessel's brown-stone house, was duly made. Sheilah, in uniform of pale pink chambray, white apron, and dainty muslin cap, soon became enamored of her surroundings. She was assigned to a tall, somewhat sour-looking female, who ruled the second floor. A vast and echoing corridor and four bed-rooms were hers to keep in spotless order. But she did not find the work as hard as standing, from eight to six, in the department store. Moreover, she had such fare as she had never dreamed of; a room to herself, small and of nun-like plainness but fresh and dainty as those she tended. The life was new, was piquant, was delightful.

Once a week she left it to carry her liberal aid to her mother. But she never ascended the dingy stairs without qualms. She was restlessly miserable at the moil and toil in which her mother lived, and indignant at her content—content so ignoble.

And poor Pat? For three weeks he fought out his battles alone. Then, motherless, he fled to Sheilah's mother for comfort, and the bitter-sweet of news of the dear star absent from his clouded sky. Finally, he took a room in Mrs. Moriarty's tenement, for the pleasure of being near her constantly. Only on Tuesrays, Sheilah's night off, did he stay away, wandering up and down Riverside Drive, dreaming day-dreams on the benches and finding solace in the beauties of sky and water.

"Now, don't you lose heart, lad," Mrs. Moriarty admonished him. "It's all very grand, that place where Sheilah is, and her head's just turned with it. But it ain't hers! And one day, if she's a woman, she'll want the smallest thing that's her very own. You wait."

He waited for three months. But during that time a change came over him. He visited Mrs. Moriarty so often that he was initiated into the sorrowful mystery of a woman's life. Like many another man, he had wondered, "What the women folks did the whole live-long day—them as didn't work for bread?" Now, he saw that they toiled endlessly, at a weary succession of small and often heavy tasks, which sprang, hydra-headed, to full life the moment they seemed vanquished. He would go in at supper-time to see piles of dishes awaiting the "washin'-up." This done, Moira and Mike, both under six, claimed care and attention, if they were to be put cleanly to bed. Clothes had to be looked over, mended, washed or ironed. The day's work was literally never done.

"Why, I'm better off than most," said Mrs. Moriarty, when he spoke of this one night. "I'm busy most part of th' day, but I've children that bring home 'nough to keep us going, and I c'n see 'em getting on, too, and on the way to steady lives. Jem'll be in the force, less'n two years, and Dan's at a grocery. Sheilah, she's doing well, if not in the way we wish, and the little 'uns go to school, and don't often play hookey. No, lad, I ain't so bad off."

She was leaning contentedly back in her chair, looking at the glow in the tiny stove. The late November night was chilly, and outside a light rain was falling.

"Anyway," she went on, "it's not when yer youngest is past five that you do be having yer hard time—I mean, if yer a woman. It's while you've one at the breast, and another dragging at your skirts, and another, or two or three, say, big 'nough to run off, and be at mischief, and get lost, or into bad company, that you ache all night, and wor-rk all day, all day."

She stopped. Her mind wandered back to darker days, and she lost her way in a tangle of gloomy yet sordid memories, fraught with weariness and pain. Pat, the light of the coal-oil lamp falling on his red curls, listened to this intimate revelation with strange emotions. This was a woman's life! To this he had wished—did still wish—to drag his dainty Sheilah! He loathed himself. The whole scheme of creation seemed wrong. It seemed to him now that only the rich had the right to wed. And yet his longing for Sheilah was the torment of his days and of his nights, and one evening he set off to the brown-stone mansion of Mrs. Van Tessel, and, penetrating the outworks of the fortress with some difficulty, found a side entrance and asked to see Sheilah.

He was shown to a small room in the basement, and bidden to wait. Sheilah came at last, in her pink chambray, trimly fitting, her dark hair, no longer pompadoured, surmounted by a dainty cap, and her slim waist encircled by what might have been a doll's apron. Pat looked as one who has seen a vision. He rose, trembling, twisting his cap in his hands, and looking at her speechlessly. She had always been somewhat of a marvel to him, but never so daintily apart, so heart-achingly remote.

"Why, Pat, I'm glad to see you," she said. "Sit down. Mother told me you've kept well."

"Sheilah!" he implored. "Oh, Sheilah!"

A dim shape of abnegation had begun to form of late in his mind. He saw himself, going solitary all his days, that she might be free of care and trouble. This dim shape melted into mist at the sight of her. Come what might, he wanted her with a passion that seemed to burn him as he stood before her. Primitive desires rose in his mind. He could have snatched her up, and carried her away as the Sabine women were borne away. Perhaps if his knowledge of history had afforded him that precedent, Sheilah might not that night have returned to her tiny room under the brown stone eaves. But she did. Convention mastered Pat, and he hardly pressed the little hand she gave him.

She was sweetly gentle. She chatted to him of the splendors of the house, of the numbers of the servants of the entertainments, the dresses, the reporters, and the reporters' blunders!

"Why, Pat, they said that Mrs. Van Tessel wore blue chiffon and pearls, and all the time it was Nile green mousseline and emeralds! I know, for I was called in to hold down the train while her maids—she has two—sewed some lilies of the valley on it! Oh, Pat! How I'd like to be wearing the things I see!"

"D'ye like seein' them, when you can't?" he asked at last. "Don't ye want to come away from it? Don't ye want to be the queen of a little, little place, instead of being a servant here?"

Sheilah's dark eyes widened.

"Queen of a little place? How nicely you put it, Pat! But the queen of that little place would have to scrub, wouldn't she? and cook, and carry water, and split kindling, and wash and iron? Why, my washing's done for me, here! And we live just as well, almost, as the people upstairs, we do, Pat."

"And that matters to you? Why, Sheilah, seems to me, I'd eat dry bread all my life to be near you."

The girl turned to him sweetly. "Pat, you make me feel so mean! I wish I was like mother. I wish——"

She stopped. She had meant to say, "I wish you didn't care." But, as she looked at the honest, homely face, the clear blue eyes, the red curly head, she could not utter the wish!

"I guess I don't fall in love the way some do," she said slowly. "One of the housemaids here, she's just crazy over the third footman! Sometimes Milly and I get scared she'll make away with herself if he don't notice her. And he won't, because he's just as crazy over the second lady's maid, and she—well, you see, she's so above him that he might just as well be in love with Mrs. Van Tessel herself while he's about it!"

Pat felt a pang of sympathy with the stricken housemaid, and a desire to thump the unresponsive footman into a jelly. But another fear awakened within him—a fear for which the footman was responsible.

"Sheilah! The place just swarms with 'em—liveries and all! Do you?" He stopped.

But Sheilah's frank smile disarmed his jealous anger.

"Oh, no, Pat. I don't care for any of 'em. I like the comfort of the life. But, when it comes to a man—there's no one I like as much as I like you."

Pat was forced to leave her with that cold comfort. And for some days he gave himself to hard thinking. Mrs. Moriarty missed him sorely, for he came no more to talk and hear of Sheilah.

Spring lingered that year, but it came. With its coming the Van Tessel season ended. Among the servants retained to accompany the family to Newport was Sheilah.

It was later in the summer—a hot, humid summer—and the papers were filled with accounts of deaths from heat prostrations.

When Pat came back to Mrs. Moriarty he found her bending in anguish over Moira, lying in white stillness on the table, drawn close to the window. The child looked a smaller Sheilah, her face made older by weariness and pain.

"I buried Mike yesterday," said the poor mother simply. "And I'm thinking I'll lose Moira, too."

Pat's thoughts flew to Sheilah. He spoke her name.

Mrs. Moriarty shook her head. "It's thankful I am that she's where she can get a breath of air," she said. "Maybe, if she'd stay'd at the store, she'd have gone under, too. Sheilah's not strong, not strong at all."

All that night Pat's red head bent beside the gray one over the dying child. And when the end came, and the bereaved mother's anguish found the plenteous and eloquent expression which is the gift of the Celt, Pat, beside her, vowed that no woman should, through him, know such grief. Sheilah, whom he loved, had refused him, but she might marry a richer man. Let her. He would be free of her pain. He would not look at her sorrow, to know himself the cause.

And, just as he was almost elate with the strength and fervor of his resolve, Sheilah came back from Newport, weary of luxury, of subjection, of association on terms of unbearable inequality with the rich and the great.

Her grief at the loss of her little brother and sister—her indignant pain at not having been summoned to do her share of nursing, was sincere and deep. She took her old place at the notion counter, and slept beside her mother on the hard straw bed, across the foot of which no Moira now tossed in restless sleep.

But Sheilah was young, and not deep, or stern of fibre. Pat had been the lodestone, after all, to draw her back, and, her tears shed, she looked to his coming with a beating heart.

Her savings had provided her mother with the mourning out of which the poor, especially the poor of the Old Country, extract a certain satisfaction. Sheilah, more modern, was content with a white chambray and a stock touched here and there with a black ribbon. She knew that she looked well, and she longed to read the old assurance in Pat's eyes.

When he came Mrs. Moriarty greeted him, and then left the lovers alone.

Sheilah lifted shy eyes to Pat's blue gaze.

"Well, Pat, I've come back," she said.

"Your mother'll be glad," he answered gravely. "She's a good woman, Sheilah."

Sheilah felt the tears dim her eyes.

"She's very good," she agreed. Then silence fell. Sheilah, unable to bear it, crossed to the window, and looked at the line of roofs against the sky.

"Do you remember coming to see me?" she asked at length. "Do you remember what you said, Pat?"

"I guess I don't forget," he replied sheepishly.

Sheilah turned to the window and faced him. "Do you remember what you said about being queen of a little place?" she went on. "Do you know, Pat, I—I didn't think so then, but—now—that sounds—nice."

Her cheeks flamed in the gathering dusk. She turned away to see the sky line, still more sharp and clear, and waited—waited till Pat's slow brain should have realized her words; but Pat stood in dumb agony, holding himself to his vow.

He had no words for her, and Sheilah sank, sobbing into the chair by the table.

"You don't care—you don't," she went. "Oh, go away, then—go away. Why do you stay to shame me?"

The dignity of his honest intent, the dignity of his own sacrifice, gave Patrick O'Meara the look of a prince. All embarrassment left him. At the sound of his voice, Sheilah lifted her head.

"Ye're not to say I don't care," began her lover. "Ye're never to think that! Sheilah, mavourneen. But I've seen your mother's life, and I've seen, in me mind's eye, what my wife will be—if I had a wife! Ye've told me, many a time, Sheilah, and ye've told me true! She'd have to wash and bake and scrub and iron. She'd have to rise early and sleep late. And there'd be children—and—they make life hard—for the woman! I'll not bring you nor any woman to it, Sheilah. I'll never have a wife!"

He said the words solemnly and Sheilah shivered as she listened. The luxuries she had loved, the trifles that had made her pleasure, suddenly shriveled away, before the fire of her longing for the man who renounced her, for the clasp of the arms that would not hold her, the touch of the lips that no longer sought to touch hers. She rose, stretching out trembling hands.

"Pat, Pat—Pat!" she cried. "Don't you see—I—I—like you enough, Pat—not to mind!"

He shook his head.

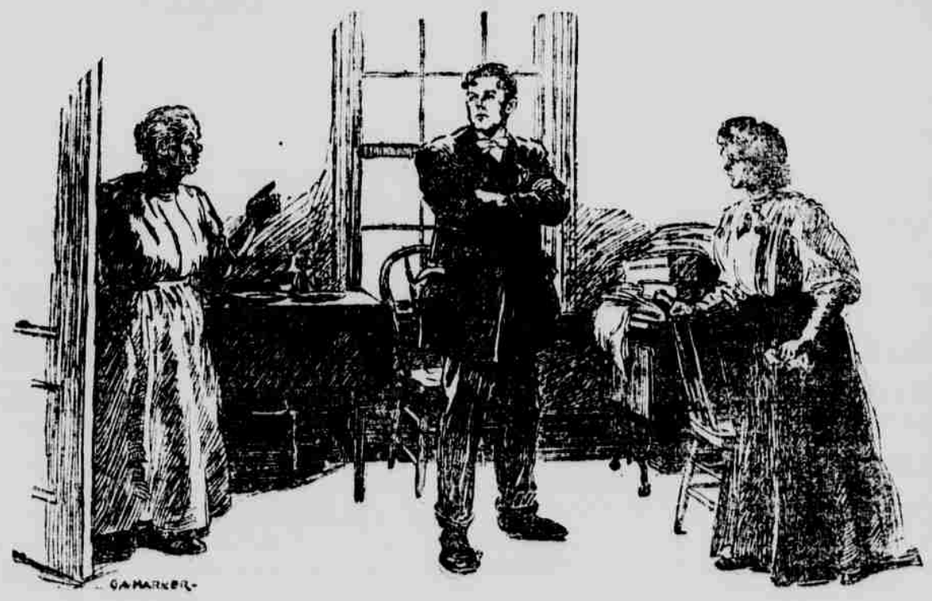
"Not now ye don't mind," he said gently. "I remember what ye told me, Sheilah, once, before ye went to Mrs. Van Tessel's. 'For a time, ye said, 'the flat, and the furniture, and the new clothes would make it not so bad!' I see that now, Sheilah, though I didn't then. A woman's life—a poor woman's life—is cruel hard, and I'll not bring you to it."

There was a sad finality in his tone that made argument, pleadings, futile. Sheilah stood trembling, her happiness falling in ruins about her, while she, helpless, could but watch its fall.

"I—I—like you—enough—not to mind," she whispered, her tears falling.

Pat folded his arms across his breast, that they might not fold her against his own will. While so they stood, the door of the inner room opened, and Mrs. Moriarty came out.

"Ye're wrong, Pat, though it's well enough ye do be meanin'," she said, and Sheilah knew by the words that her mother had been living through her own courtship, in listening to hers. "But ye think too much of hardness, Pat, and it's sorry I am if words of mine have made you think that love isn't worth all it costs!"



"YE'RE WRONG, PAT, THOUGH IT'S WELL ENOUGH YE DO BE MEANIN'."

She stood at the other side of the table. The light was dim, but they could see how strange a beauty glowed on the rough, kindly face.

"I've said that it's hard to bear children, and hard enough to raise 'em," she went on. "And only the dear Mother Mary knows what it is to lose 'em! But, for it all, do ye think I'd have lived single? Do you think I'd missed the times when Dan Moriarty courted me, and the years that he was my man—mine, and not another woman's—for the sake o' the wor-rk? Do you think I'd 'a' missed one of my babies, for the trouble they made me? Why, when my little ones died, and you stood by me, Pat, like the son ye've been to me—didn't ye know that I thanked the Lord they'd been mine for a time, if it was but five years and six years? Oh, a woman's life is hard, and her strength'll go, and her looks'll go, but if her man's a good man, and loves her, it's worth it all, Pat; it's worth it all."

Pat turned from her to look at Sheilah. The dusk was falling, and he had to step closer to her to read her eyes. And in the dim room, with its poor furnishings, another light was growing—the light of the hope that had come back.

"It's worth it all," repeated Mrs. Moriarty.

"Is it?" his eyes asked of Sheilah's.

Her answer was a step forward, her arms held out.

NEXT WEEK, A TILT WITH BALSAC By Louis Weadock